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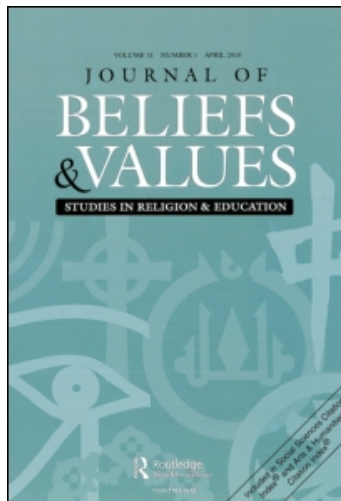
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Young Children's Descriptions of God: influences of parents' and teachers' God concepts and religious denomination of schools

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ABSTRACT *This study extends prior research on antecedents of individual differences in God concepts in early childhood by examining relations of parents' and teachers' God concepts and religious denomination of schools with children's God concepts. Participants were 165 preschoolers (mean age 63 months), 107 of their parents and 16 teachers. These subjects were distributed over eight elementary schools belonging to four different religious denominations, i.e. Catholic, Dutch Reformed, Orthodox Reformed and State schools. The God concepts of children, parents and teachers were measured using interviews and questionnaires. Results showed that both parents' and teachers' God concepts were predictive of children's God concepts, but each in a different way. Parents seem to influence the relational component of children's God concepts particularly. Teachers especially contribute to biblical content of children's God concepts. Religious denomination of schools had independent effects on children's God concepts, controlling for parental denomination.*

Introduction

This article offers an empirical perspective on origins of God concepts in early childhood. The concept of God has often been considered crucial in the development and form of an individual's personal faith, and, therefore, has been studied

more than any other religious concept during the past few decades. The concept of God has been widely researched, also among children and youth (cf. Hyde, 1990). However, previous investigators of God concepts among preschoolers and older children have, for the most part, concentrated on age differences in God concepts, focusing mainly on the role of cognitive development in God concepts (cf. Nye & Carlson, 1984; Tamminen *et al.*, 1988; Smoliak, 1999). Relatively little is known about the origins of individual differences in God concepts at a given age, especially in young children (cf. Tamminen, 1991).

With God concept the descriptive as well as the affective or evaluative aspect of the mental representation of God is meant. We mainly refer to the Western Christian tradition here. The descriptive aspect alludes to information the child gives about what God is, what God looks like, where God is, what God can do, what God wants of people and what the child likes to say to God (cf. Heller, 1986). The evaluative aspect is concerned with the positive or negative value a child assigns to God (i.e. a loving, comforting or a stern, rejecting God image).

Intergenerational presentation and representation, i.e. religious socialization at home is postulated to be the major factor in the formation of individual differences in children's God concepts and other aspects of faith (cf. Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997). An important way in which parents are supposed to influence their children's God concepts is for example by talking about or 'showing' their own God concepts. Among older children (from age 10 onwards, Tamminen, 1991) and adolescents (Acock & Bengston, 1978; Clark *et al.*, 1988; Francis & Gibson, 1993), similarities between parents' and children's God concepts and religious beliefs, church attendance, attitudes to Christianity, religious experiences and religious practices have been found. We are not aware of research on relations between God concepts of parents and preschoolers. So, the first innovative aspect of the present study is to examine relations between young children's and parents' God concepts.

A second innovative aspect of the present study is that it includes God concepts of teachers as predictors of young children's God concepts. Another factor in predicting individual differences in God concepts that is considered here is the effect of religious denomination of schools. Results of studies on the effects of religious denomination of schools on children's faith are inconclusive (for an overview, see Hyde, 1990). Some studies demonstrated no or quite weak effects of schools in predicting attitudes to Christianity (cf. Francis, 1986). Other studies did show effects of Lutheran schools on religious behaviour and knowledge in the case of parents who had little contact with the church (cf. Johnstone, 1966), or when attendance to religious (Catholic) schools was supported by parental influence (cf. Greely & Rossi, 1966).

In summary, the first objective of this study is to trace dimensions in God concepts of preschoolers, teachers and parents. The second goal is to study similarities in God concepts between children, parents and teachers. The third objective is to examine whether God concepts of the children differ according to religious denomination of schools.

Concerning the second goal we expect children to have God concepts that share the same features as the God concepts of their parents and teachers. Due to the age

of the children, it is supposed that the influence of parents on children's God concepts will be greater than the influence of teachers. According to this hypothesis, God concepts of children and parents should be more similar than those of children and their teachers.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 165 preschoolers (mean age 63 months), 107 of their parents and 16 teachers. These subjects were distributed over eight elementary schools belonging to four different religious denominations; 17 children of an Orthodox Reformed school in Amersfoort, 75 children of a Dutch Reformed school in Nijmegen and in the province of Zeeland, 26 children of two Catholic schools in Zeeland and 47 children of three State schools in Zeeland and Nijmegen. Amersfoort and Nijmegen are medium-sized Dutch cities.

State schools in the Netherlands are religiously neutral. They are not allowed to give religious education to their pupils (De Ruyter & Miedema, 2000). Religious education is an integral part of all religiously affiliated schools (Protestant or Catholic). The Catholic and Dutch Reformed schools considered here are open, inclusive schools (cf. Miedema, 2000). The Orthodox Reformed school studied here is a segregated closed school, characterised by the embodiment of exclusive Christian faith (cf. Miedema, 2000). Among the parents 44.9% regarded themselves as non-church members, 24.2% were Dutch Reformed, 17.9% belonged to Orthodox Reformed churches, and 13.1% were Catholic.

Measures and Procedures

The God concepts of children, parents and teachers were measured using interviews and questionnaires. All children were interviewed individually by a female examiner in a 45-minute session to assess their God concepts and concepts of self and others, as well as attachment representations (not described here further). The children were taken from their kindergarten classes to a separate room. The order of the different parts of the interview session was the same for each child. First, in order to get acquainted with the interview procedure and experimenter, the children were asked to draw a picture of God and to say something about the drawing. Second, they answered open questions about the nature of God (e.g. what is God, where is God, what is God able to do, etc.). After that, they completed scales referring to concepts of self and others. Then, the children were presented a 23-item structured questionnaire concerning characteristics of God. Finally, children's mother-child attachment representations were measured.

God Concepts Parents/Teachers

Open questions. Parents and teachers were asked to complete three open questions: 'When I think about God, I think of ...', 'What do you want your children/pupils to learn about God?' and 'How do you practise your religion/worldview with your children/pupils at home/in the classroom?' The parents' and teachers' answers were

placed in 112 different categories. A second coder independently scored 25 randomly chosen questionnaires of parents. Inter-coder agreement calculated as the number of agreements divided by the number of agreements plus disagreements was 0.76.

Closed questions. Parents and teachers completed a 25-item questionnaire using a 6-point Likert scale. Items are intended to involve God's nurture and power (cf. Benson & Spilka, 1973), i.e. 'God is caring', 'God is comforting' and 'God preserves the earth', 'God sees everything'.

God Concepts Children

Open questions. In the interview session the experimenter asked: '1. Did you ever hear about God? What is God? 2. What does God look like? 3. Is God a man, a woman, or something else? 4. Where is God? 5. What is God able to do? 6. What is praying? 7a. When do you pray? 7b. What are you doing when you pray? 7c. What do you say when you're praying? 7d. How do you feel when you're praying (happy, sad, afraid, angry)? 8. What have adults and children to do according to God? and 9. What would you say to God if you could phone him?' The children's answers were placed in 61 different categories. A second coder independently scored the answers of 50 randomly chosen children. Inter-coder agreement calculated as the number of agreements divided by the number of agreements plus disagreements was 0.85.

Closed questions. A 23-item questionnaire was used (cf. Dickie *et al.*, 1997). The items are intended to involve both positive (i.e. God loves me, God makes me happy) and negative (i.e. I'm afraid of God, God is angry when you do something bad) valence of God concepts. The items were read by the experimenter. Children rated each item on a 3-point (no, sometimes, or yes) scale.

Results

In order to assess dimensions of God concepts of caregivers (parents and teachers) and children, principal components factor analyses with varimax rotation (Kaiser, 1958) were conducted over the items/responses of each measure (open and closed questions of caregivers and children, respectively). A minimum eigenvalue of 1.00 (Kaiser, 1960) and the scree test (Cattell, 1966) were used as criteria for extracting factors. Based on these factors, scales were constructed for each measure. Items with absolute factor scores > 0.4 were included in the scales. None of the items loaded on more than one factor. For each of the measures scale scores were computed for each subject by averaging the subject's scores on the constituent items. Internal consistencies of the scales were measured by Cronbach's α . The scale scores were used in further analyses concerning objectives 2 and 3.

Objective 1: dimensions in God concepts

God concepts parents/teachers open questions. The answers on the open questions were placed in four scales (explaining 24.3% of the variance); *Religious Practices and God as Friend* (e.g. reading the Bible or religious stories, praying, God is a father/friend, God is always available; 10 items, $\alpha = 0.77$), *God Wants the Best and Positive Emotions* (e.g. God wants the best for people, God wants a heaven on earth, no wars, peace, God or praying associated with positive emotions, like happiness and warmth; 4 items, $\alpha = 0.68$), *God in Beautiful/Miraculous Events and Doubt* (e.g. associations with inexplicable, beautiful and miraculous situations, problems with suffering and doubt about the existence of God, associations with nature; 5 items, $\alpha = 0.69$) and *Traditional God* (e.g. God is my shepherd or saviour, association with the Creation, association with biblical terms, stories and norms, like 'We have to worship, obey, praise the Lord'; 5 items, $\alpha = 0.55$).

God concepts parents/teachers closed questions. Three scales were found (explaining 67.4% of the variance), called *Loving God* (e.g. God loves people, God is patient, God is caring; 16 items, $\alpha = 0.97$), *Authoritarian God* (e.g. God is strict, God condemns, God punishes; 7 items, $\alpha = 0.80$) and *Distant God* (God is aloof and God is not available; 2 items, $\alpha = 0.69$).

God concepts children open questions. Three factors were found (explaining 37.6% of the variance): *Biblical God* (e.g. God is in heaven; association with miracles, like God makes sick people healthy and dead people alive; biblical elements, that is association with biblical stories and biblical words, like the Saviour or Creator; association with moral standards, like play together, sharing toys, etc.; association with Jesus, biblical anthropomorphism, like having a beard, wearing a white dress, etc.; 9 items, $\alpha = 0.76$), *Praying* (praying or bible reading at school, reference to religious songs or rhymes and posture of prayer, like folding hands and closed eyes; 3 items, $\alpha = 0.61$) and *Negative Fantasies* (negative fantasies or negative onlogical answers and colours (not white), e.g. 'God kills little animals'; 2 items, $\alpha = 0.55$).

God concepts children closed questions. Five scales were distinguished (explaining 54.8% of the variance), called *Caring God* (a more positive valence, like God helps people, God cares for people and animals, God can comfort you when you're sad; 5 items, $\alpha = 0.74$), *Potency of God* (e.g. God sees everything you do, God is the boss, God is very strong; 6 items, $\alpha = 0.72$), *Punishing God* (a more negative valence, like God punishes often and God is angry when you do something bad; 4 items, $\alpha = 0.71$), *God as Loving Friend* (a more positive valence, e.g. God loves me and God is a friend; 4 items, $\alpha = 0.69$) and *God Like Parents* (God looks like daddy, God looks like mummy and God is strict; 3 items, $\alpha = 0.64$).

Objective 2: similarities in God concepts between caregivers and children

In order to assess similarities in God concepts between caregivers and children, that

TABLE I. Stepwise regression analysis predicting children's God concepts from parents' and teachers' God concepts

Dependent variables: children's God concepts	Predictor	Beta	Multiple R
God as loving friend (Closed Questions)	1. Parents: God in beautiful/miraculous events & Doubt (Open)	- 0.29	0.28
	2. Parents: Religious practices & God as friend(Open)	0.22	0.36
God like parents (Closed Questions)	1. Parents: God in beautiful/miraculous events & Doubt (Open)	0.33	0.33
	2. Parents: God wants the best & Positive emotions (Open)	0.26	0.40
	3. Teachers: Traditional God (Open)	- 0.22	0.46
Negative fantasies (Open Questions)	1. Parents: God in beautiful/miraculous events & Doubt (Open)	0.53	0.50
	2. Teachers: Loving God (Closed)	- 0.19	0.53
Caring God (Closed Questions)	1. Teachers: Authoritarian God (Closed)	0.30	0.32
	2. Parents: Distant God (Closed)	- 0.23	0.39
Potency of God (Closed Questions)	1. Teachers: Authoritarian God (Closed)	0.26	0.26
Biblical God (Open Questions)	1. Teachers: Religious practices & God as friend(Open)	0.31	0.25
	2. Teachers: God wants the best & Positive emotions (Open)	0.28	0.38
Praying (Open Questions)	1. Teachers: Authoritarian God (Closed)	- 0.25	0.25
	2. Teachers: Religious practices & God as friend(Open)	0.53	0.40
	3. Teachers: Traditional God (Open)	- 0.40	0.46
Punishing God (Closed Questions)	-	-	-

is to predict children's God concepts from caregivers' God concepts, stepwise multiple regression analyses were conducted separately for each of the eight different scales of children's God concepts (the dependent variables), i.e. Biblical God, Praying, Negative fantasies (based on open questions) and Caring God, Potency of God, Punishing God, God as loving friend and God like parents (based on closed questions). Predictors were teachers' and parents' God concepts: Religious practices and God as friend, God wants the best and Positive emotions, God in beautiful/miraculous events and Problems with suffering and Traditional God (open questions) and Loving God, Authoritarian God and Distant God (closed questions). Table I shows the betaweights and the multiple correlations of the selected predictors on the dependent variables (ranked according to influence of parents, parents/teachers and teachers, respectively).

TABLE II. Means of children's God concepts by denomination of schools

	State	Catholic	Dutch Reformed	Orthodox Reformed	$F(3,159)$	$p <$
Caring God	2.27 ^a	2.31 ^a	2.64 ^b	2.88 ^b	10.38	0.001
Potency of God	2.44 ^a	2.56 ^{ab}	2.66 ^b	2.92 ^c	4.85	0.005
Punishing God	1.94	1.90	1.94	1.56	1.44	n.s.
God as loving friend	2.57 ^a	2.67 ^{ab}	2.82 ^b	2.87 ^b	3.60	0.05
God like parents	1.54	1.56	1.57	1.16	1.95	n.s.
Biblical God	9.06 ^a	9.38 ^a	13.83 ^b	15.00 ^b	10.32	0.001
Praying	0.57 ^a	1.88 ^b	2.53 ^b	0.18 ^a	17.34	0.001
Negative fantasies	0.26	0.21	0.27	0.06	0.38	n.s.

Note: Means in the same row that do not share the same subscripts differ significantly for denominations of schools ($p < 0.05$).

From Table I it can be seen that children's *Punishing God* concept was not related to any of the predictors. *God as loving friend* was negatively related to parents' concept of 'God in beautiful/miraculous events and doubt' and positively related to parents' concept 'Religious practices and God as friend', respectively (total explained variance was 13%). *God like parents* was positively predicted by parents' concept of 'God in beautiful/miraculous events and doubt' and by parental ideas of 'God wants the best and Positive emotions' and negatively by a traditional God concept of teachers, respectively. The three predictors explained 21% of the variance. *Negative fantasies* were positively correlated with parents' concept of 'God in beautiful/miraculous events and doubt' and negatively associated with teachers' 'Loving God', respectively (28% explained variance). *Caring God* was positively predicted by teachers' 'Authoritarian God' and negatively by parents' 'Distant God', respectively, explaining 15% of the variance. *Potency of God* was positively predicted by teachers' 'Authoritarian God' (7% explained variance). *Biblical God* was predicted in positive direction by teachers' 'Religious practices and God as friend' and teachers' 'God wants the best and Positive emotions', respectively, explaining 14% of the variance. *Praying* was negatively related to teachers' 'Authoritarian God', positively to teachers' 'Religious practices and God as friend' and negatively to teachers' 'Traditional God', respectively, explaining 22% of the variance.

Objective 3: influence of religious denomination of schools on children's God concepts

In order to explore whether children's God concepts differed according to religious denomination of schools we conducted MANOVAs controlling for religious denomination of parents. Children's scale scores of Caring God, Potency of God, God as loving friend, God like Parents, Punishing God, Biblical God, Praying and Negative fantasies were used as dependent variables and denomination of schools and denomination of parents as between subject variables. Table II shows the means on God concepts of the groups children belonging to the four different denominations.

Parental religious denomination did not have a significant multivariate main

effect, $F(24, 254) < 1$, n.s., or interaction effects with denomination of schools, $F(40, 422) = 1.28$, n.s. Religious denomination of schools had a significant multivariate effect on children's God concepts, $F(24, 452) = 4.99$, $p < 0.0005$. Effects on five of the eight dependent variables were univariately significant, $F_s(3, 159) > 3.60$, $p_s < 0.05$.

As shown in Table II, children of the Dutch and Orthodox Reformed schools scored higher on Caring God and Biblical God than children of the State and Catholic schools. Also, the children of both types of Reformed schools perceived God more as a loving friend than children of the State schools. The pupils from Catholic schools scored in between those of the State and Reformed schools on God as loving friend. Pupils of the Orthodox Reformed school had the highest score on Potency of God, followed by those of the Dutch Reformed and State schools. Children from Catholic schools scored in between the pupils of State and Dutch Reformed schools on Potency of God. Finally, pupils of Catholic and Dutch Reformed schools had higher scores on praying than the ones of State and Orthodox Reformed schools.

Conclusions and Discussion

The goal of the present study was to extend prior research in the area of antecedents of God concepts in early childhood by examining relations of parents' and teachers' God concepts and religious denomination of schools with young children's God concepts.

Therefore, our first objective was to find dimensions in God concepts of caregivers (parents and teachers) and children. The God concepts of all subjects were measured using open and structured questionnaires, generally yielding reliable scales, even for the young children. Exceptions were two scales based on open questions, i.e. caregivers' 'Traditional God' ($\alpha = 0.55$) and children's 'Negative Fantasies' ($\alpha = 0.55$). With open questions the wide range of potential answers can more easily lead to idiosyncratic answering than with closed questions, lowering the chance of finding reliable factors. Although the dimensions based on the open questionnaires give somewhat less reliable results and explain less variance than those of the closed questionnaires, they have the advantage that they yield richer information about subjects' own frame of reference concerning their views on God than the 'closed dimensions'. In future research we will use this information in expanding and refining the closed questionnaires.

Comparing children's and caregivers' 'open' God dimensions it can be seen that caregivers' 'God wants the best' and 'God in beautiful events and doubt' were not found in children's answers. Children's Biblical God shows some similarities with caregivers' traditional God. Children's praying looks a little like caregivers' 'Religious practices and God as friend'. No negative fantasies about God among caregivers were found. A remarkable result was that children's closed God concepts (5 scales) were more differentiated than those of parents and teachers (3 scales). Children's caring God and God as loving friend together resemble caregivers' loving God. Children's potency of God and punishing God together look like caregivers'

authoritarian God. Children's God like parents and caregivers' distant God could not be found among caregivers and children, respectively, because we did not ask caregivers about their parents and we did not ask children about aloofness of God.

A striking finding concerning objective 2 of this study is that both parents' and teachers' God concepts were predictive of children's God concepts, but each in a different way. We found six significant relations between parents' and children's God concepts and nine between those of teachers and children. Thus, contrary to our expectation, children's God concepts did not resemble those of their parents more than those of their teachers. The effects of parental and teachers' God concepts on children's God concepts differ depending on the kind of God concept considered. Parents seem to influence the relational component of children's concept of God particularly (God as loving friend), whereas teachers especially influence biblical content of children's God concepts and prayer. This finding may be explained by the different roles parents versus teachers can have in children's lives. Nurture, love and care are typical characteristics of the parent-child relationship, while instruction in myths and belief systems is more typical for religious education by teachers in the classroom.

Overviewing the results of objective 2 more specifically, the less parents doubt the existence of God, the less they utter problems with suffering in the world, the less they experience God in miraculous, beautiful events and the more they describe religious practices and the more they experience God as a father or friend, the more their children perceive God as a loving friend, as someone who is nice, who is a friend and who loves them. A distant God of parents is related to a less caring God concept among children. Also, when parents describe their God concepts in ways other than in traditional religious language, i.e. as God wants the best/God associated with positive emotions and God in miraculous/beautiful events, God in nature, or when they doubt or have problems with suffering, their children are more inclined to say that God looks like their parents.

Negative fantasies of children about God were predicted by parental God concepts mainly. Parents who have doubts about the existence of God, who have problems with suffering and who experience God in beautiful events/nature have children who score higher on negative fantasies. In addition, teachers with a more loving God concept have pupils with less negative fantasies about God.

Concerning the main effects of teachers we can state that the more teachers describe religious practices, the more they experience God as a father or friend, the more they think God wants the best and the more they associate God with positive feelings, the more their pupils will have a biblical God concept, e.g. saying that God is in heaven, God is able to do miracles, that God is associated with Jesus, and the more they will refer to prayer at school. When teachers have an authoritarian and traditional God concept, their pupils are prone to have a more potent and caring God concept (both are biblical characteristics of God), but refer less often to prayer. An explanation for this last finding is that it may be that teachers who have an authoritarian, traditional God concept (these are especially teachers from Orthodox Reformed schools; see also results of objective 3 about effects of denomination of schools on praying) use an elevated style in their prayers (e.g. 'Our Saviour in

heaven, we ask thee for the forgiveness of our sins') which is not very well adapted for children's understanding and experiences and which may not be linked with posture of prayer or religious songs in children's mind. We suppose that teachers who mention religious practices and who perceive God as loving friend use more simple language in their prayer, probably describing daily experiences of children in their prayer which makes it more easy for children to recall these prayers than to refer to those elevated ones (e.g. 'Dear God, thank you for the beautiful weather today. It was so nice to have fun outside in the playground.').

That we found no relations of any variable with a punishing God concept also deserves some attention. It is conceivable that a punishing God concept is less salient for young children in the present time than a loving, caring God and other God concepts, and, therefore, is less predictable than other God concepts. This suggestion is in line with results of empirical studies of the last two decades in which the prevalence of God's love over God's authority was emphasized (cf. Nelsen *et al.*, 1977, 1985; Hertel & Donahue, 1995). The present study also shows that children score higher on a caring God ($m = 2.57$) and God as loving friend ($m = 2.74$) than on a punishing God image ($m = 1.86$). The suggestion is also consistent with contemporary postmodern theologies in which a loving God is emphasized, and which has shifted away from a wrathful God (cf. Tieleman, 1995; Tilley, 1995).

A last issue regarding the findings of objectives 1 and 2 is the representative nature of the sample. Our initial goal was not to have a representative sample but to include reasonable sized groups of the leading Western Christian denominations in the Netherlands. This goal was accomplished. Compared to Dutch statistics (Becker & De Wit, 2000) our sample (of parents) is found to be reasonably representative, except for both Reformed groups which are overrepresented. Additional research is recommended to determine whether our findings are sample specific.

Results of the third objective, i.e. exploring influence of religious denomination of schools on children's God concepts, controlling for parental religious denomination demonstrated independent effects of school denomination on five of the eight God concepts of children. Generally, children of State schools had the lowest scores on the five dependent variables (caring and potent God, God as loving friend, biblical God and praying). The Catholic children either resembled the ones of State schools in caring and biblical God, scored in between children of State and Dutch Reformed schools concerning potency of God and God as loving friend and resembled the Dutch Reformed ones in praying. Children of the Dutch and Orthodox Reformed schools resembled each other in all concepts except for potency of God and praying. These children had the highest scores on a biblical and caring God and God as loving friend. The Orthodox children perceived God as more potent than the Dutch Reformed children, but they referred less often to praying than the children from Catholic and Dutch Reformed schools.

These findings confirm what is already known about form and content of religious education in the different types of schools. State schools in the Netherlands are not allowed to give an experiential and ritual religious education to their pupils in the regular curriculum (De Ruyter & Miedema, 2000). Thus, since children of these schools are only cognitively informed about the Christian tradition, it is conceivable that they have the lowest scores on the five significant God concepts.

Catholic schools generally pay attention with preschoolers to prayer, religious songs and Christian holidays, but are less inclined to tell young children about the Bible (cf. Kwakman & Van Oers, 1993). Therefore, young children of the Catholic schools score in between the pupils of the State and the Dutch Reformed schools in some God concepts (loving friend, prayer and potency), whereas they resemble the children of State schools in other respects (caring and biblical God). Orthodox schools are comparable in religious education to Dutch Reformed schools except for the power of God. Orthodox schools emphasize the power of God more strongly than Dutch Reformed schools (cf. Stoffels, 1995), which is revealed in the higher scores of the Orthodox children on potency of God.

In sum, both teachers and parents contribute to individual differences in young children's God concepts, but in a different way. Religious denomination of schools has an impact on children's God concepts, independent from the role of parental religious denomination.

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